THE GOD WHO HOPES AND EXPECTS
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Psalm 8
Colossians 1:15–20
Genesis 1:26–29, 3:1–13

"So God created humankind in his image. . . .
And God said to them, ". . . Have dominion."
Genesis 1:27–28 (NRSV)

We are the only species whose choices
are not branded into the fibers of our natures.
We must choose to be who we are.
But first we must discern what human beings are for.
And we have only two backgrounds against which
to measure our worth. Our lives are either speckles of light
against infinite darkness or smudges of gray within infinite Light.
We are here to discover our shining.

William O'Malley S.J.
"Quantum Spirituality"
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Merciful and gracious Creator,
we are grateful for your world on this beautiful autumn morning.
We are grateful for this church that calls us to worship together
and to join you in caring for your world.
In this time together, speak your word to us,
that we might believe and trust you with our lives
and go from here to love and serve the world
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Ministers and theology professors learn to live with the knowledge that people think we don't really live in this world, aren't interested in things other people are interested in, and don't talk about subjects people like to talk about. James Gustafson, a very distinguished scholar of theological ethics who taught at the University of Chicago and Vanderbilt University, was attending a cocktail party when a colleague from the chemistry department, a little too smugly, challenged him to say something theological. Gustafson thought for a moment and said, "God" (Douglas Ottati, *Interpretation*, October 2005).

William Buckley quipped that you must never say the word *God* at a Manhattan dinner party. Start talking about God and you'll be considered a fanatic and never be invited back.

There is, at the moment, a public conversation going on in our culture about the subject of God, the existence of God. It has sold a lot of books, so many that the authors—Christopher Hitchens (*The God Delusion*), Richard Dawkins (*God Is Not Great*), and Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*)—are credited with starting a movement: neo-atheism.

It is not fair to generalize. The books differ in approach and focus and in the degree of hostility toward religion. What the books have in common is that the God they reject is not the God in whom thoughtful people believe. Each author chooses particularly bizarre and offensive examples of extremist, often violent religion and critiques them, dismisses them. The truth is that thoughtful believers shudder when a popular televangelist says that the attacks of 9/11 were allowed by God to punish Americans for feminism and abortion. I don't believe in that God either, or a God who visits suffering to make a point, or arranges natural disasters, or helps with real estate deals and parking places.

And so this series of sermons on what the Bible says, and what we believe about, God: "The God Who Is," "The God Who Hides," "The God Who Creates," and this morning going a little deeper into what Christians and Jews believe, "The God Who Is Hopeful"—relentlessly hopeful about us and who expects much of us and has placed the divine image, the image of God, in each one of us.

From the very beginning of recorded time, religion begins with an experience of awe, mystery, wonder—from the amazing cave paintings in the south of France, to space probes into the vast unknown of the universe. It begins with wonder. Presbyterian theologian Douglas Ottati recommends a simple experiment, which many of us conduct and enjoy regularly. The seashore on a moonless, cloudless night is about as perfect as it gets. "Look up into the night sky," Ottati says.

> We know that only a minute fraction of the stars and planets are visible to our eyes. There are galaxies and nebulae and black holes beyond our ability to detect. . . . The whole thing has been expanding from a single point for billions of years. . . . Now focus on the light of a single star. It has traveled an enormous distance, having left its point of origin [millions] of years ago—and the light of that star has traveled other directions, not only towards us. (*Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology,* October 2005).

Ottati, a friend of mine with a great sense of humor, observes in the same essay that London bookmakers in the 1960s started taking bets at 100 to 1 odds whether there was ever life on Mars. In August 1996, the odds changed to 50 to 1, then 16 to 1, and on May 3, 2004, the day after NASA announced that the rover "Opportunity" had found evidence that there once was water on Mars, the bookies stopped taking bets.

It begins in wonder when you look up into a night sky, which apparently is exactly what a Hebrew poet did on a dark night 3,000 years ago in a desert somewhere in the Middle East and wrote, "O Lord, . . . how majestic is your name. . . . When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars you have established—what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you have cared for them?"

It is the universal experience of wonder before the majesty and mystery of creation. Frederick Buechner says religion and poems both begin with an experience of wonder. Emily Dickinson said, "Consider the lilies" is the only commandment she never broke. Mary Oliver writes gorgeously about what she sees and observes in her daily walks in rural Massachusetts:

> Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous
> to be understood. . . .
> Let me keep my distance, always, from those
> who think they have the answers.
>
> Let me keep company always with those who say
> "Look!" and laugh in astonishment,
> and bow their heads.
> *(Evidence*, p. 62)

Wendell Berry, who walks through the fields of his Kentucky farm thinking, wondering, wrote a little poem, "On the Theory of the Big Bang as the Origin of the Universe":

> I.
> What banged?
>
> II.
> Before banging
> how did it get there?
>
> III.
> When it got there
> where was it?
> (*Leavings, Poems* p.5)

“O Lord, when I look at the moon and stars, what are human beings?” The psalmist begins with the human experience of wonder and then makes a remarkable assertion:

> You have made them a little lower than God,
> and crowned them with glory and honor.
> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands.

There is awe and wonder there, and there is also responsibility, a job to do, hope and expectation.

It is at the heart of the tradition, in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible. God has created the world, brought order out of chaos, separated water and dry land, put the sun and moon in place, vegetation on the earth, birds and animals and fish in the sea. It is not a biological, historical account. It is a magnificent affirmation of faith, and its high point, its climax, comes when God creates human beings and says about them something God says about no other creature: “Let us make them in our image, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds, the cattle.”

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says this is a radically inverted and revolutionary idea of God “not as one who reigns by fiat and remoteness, but as one who governs by gracious self-giving. The man and woman are not chattel and servants, but agents of God to whom much is given and from whom much is expected” (*Interpretation: Genesis,* vol. 1, p. 33).

A God who hopes and expects.

It is the distinctive feature of our religious tradition.

The image of God is in every human being, and human beings are given responsibility for God’s creation. There is grace, and there is work to do. God has high hopes for us—and equally high expectations.

Christianity has generally been better at describing our limitations and failures than our potential and God’s high view of us and high hopes. Our prayers of confession, while playing an important role in the liturgy of public worship, in addition to acknowledging the distance between God and ourselves sometimes leave a feeling of hopelessness with their dismal view of human nature and potential. We are not “miserable offenders” all the time. It is not entirely true that “there is no health in us” as the old General Confession put it. We do not always think too highly of ourselves, with an inflated idea of our importance. Sometimes we don’t think highly enough; sometimes we do not acknowledge our own importance. The original sin in the creation story is not entirely that Adam and Eve arrogantly dismiss the

rules of the garden; it is that they refuse to be responsible: Adam allows Eve to talk him into eating forbidden fruit. “She gave it to me,” he lamely responds when God asks “What have you done?” And when Eve is confronted, she blames the snake. Neither of them were responsible. The Bible says we have the image of God in us. Furthermore, God is pleased with us, so pleased that God has made us partners, put us in charge of the garden, made us responsible for the creation and for our own lives.

How important is this, this unique idea that human beings have God’s image in them and that they are responsible agents, stewards of creation—of everything? For starters, the basis of our civil order, the basic assumption of Western civilization, is that each individual is to be valued, honored, respected; that each individual has both rights and responsibilities, rights based on the God-given sanctity of each one, each one created in the divine image. Bad things happen when we violate or forget that: human slavery, for instance, persecution, bigotry.

The motion picture *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is about two little boys: one, Bruno, the son of the commandant of a Nazi concentration camp, age eight; the other, Shmuel, an eight-year-old Jewish prisoner in the camp, along with his entire family. The German boy’s parents do not want him to know what the camp is. They call it “The Farm,” and that is what Bruno thinks it is; the striped uniforms are the farm workers’ pajamas. One day the two little boys meet at the barbed wire fence. They talk, shyly at first, gradually becoming friends. They play checkers through the fence. Bruno begins to bring food to his always-hungry friend. When Bruno finally becomes aware of what is actually happening on The Farm, behind the barbed wire, that the workers are prisoners, that they are being put to death, he brings the information to Gretel, his twelve-year-old sister, who has become an avid Nazi believer. He asks, “But they are people, just like us, aren’t they?” “Well, actually, no,” his sister says, “they are not people in the same way we are.”

Some of us heard Krista Tippett, NPR host of *Speaking of Faith*, speak last week. She told about an interview with military chaplain John Morris, who sat in the studio in full battle camouflage after his second tour of duty in Iraq. He described one of the most awful days of his service in Fallujah. He stood before the charred body parts of four American contractors hanging from a bridge across the Euphrates. Fury consumed him, along with the certainty that the people who did this did not deserve to live. They were animals. He would be the agent of God, the wrath of God. As that conviction seized him, he understood that he was at an abyss that would render him capable of the very actions he hated. “God help me and have mercy on me,” he prayed. “Save me from becoming a debased, immoral human being, save my soldiers as well.” “Prayers like this, theology like this, belong in our common life,” Krista said (see also *Speaking of Faith,* pp. 175–6).

Every human being, including you and me, bears the image of God. God has high hopes and high expectations for every one of us. God has given us dominion, responsibility, for our own lives, how we live them and invest them and give them away; responsibility for our children and families and those who depend on us; responsibility for our community and nation, with obligations to participate in its political processes, engage in the challenges that face us, understand complex issues, and plow through the relentless barrage of ridiculous negative, degrading, and insulting television ads and vote for the candidate best qualified; and responsibility for the institutions we love and hold dear in our hearts.

It occurs to me regularly, and has for twenty-five years, that I not only have the honor of being part of this great institution, the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, but also responsibility for it—for its strength, its faithfulness, its future—and you do, too. It is not just for us to receive from the generation before us, to attend occasionally, to enjoy. We have been given dominion, responsibility to love this church and maintain and strengthen it, to build strong and faithfully, and to hand it over to those who will come after us. It is what Project Second Century is about and our plan to build a new building to make this church strong in the days and decades ahead.

Created in the image of God—hope and expectation.

We claim Jesus Christ as Lord, and we, each of us, have promised at one time or another to follow him every day of our lives. Jesus Christ, who was born into human history, lived among us, healed, taught, welcomed all to his table, humbly served, finally died the death all of us will die. “He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation,” St. Paul wrote to the early church in Colossae. We believe in a God whose image may be seen a little bit in all of us, fully in that man, Jesus Christ.

It begins in wonder. The God we believe in comes to us in the mystery and majesty of creation, in holy wonder at starry skies, in trees in gorgeous autumn color, in human birth, each newborn blessed with the image of the creator. The God we believe in comes to us when his creatures reflect that divine image by their own love and compassion, forgiveness and generosity, service and self-sacrifice and responsibility.

And finally, ultimately, the God we believe in comes in the one in whom the fullness of God is pleased to dwell: one who calls us to trust and to follow; one who in his life and death and resurrection makes good the ancient promise that God who created us has high hopes and expectations and will never let us go.

Regardless of what you are thinking about yourself this morning, you have the image of God in you. God has blessed you. God has given you dominion, responsibility for your part of God’s creation.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.